

Spain: Ten million workers take part in general strike

Paul Mitchell
30 September 2010

Nearly 70 percent of Spanish workers—10 million—took part in Wednesday's general strike. In some sectors, such as mining, metal, auto manufacture, electronic, fishing and other industries, participation was nearly 100 percent. The movement also encompassed many self-employed workers and small businesses.

Although the government tried to downplay the effects of the strike, the national grid operator Red Electrica Corp. said that electricity consumption was down by 20 percent.

The strike dealt a blow to business leaders, politicians and the media who claimed it would not be well supported. But without the minimum service levels agreed by the unions, which allowed the government and local authorities to determine how many airplanes, trains and buses had to be provided, the country would have ground to a complete halt. Union leaders bent over backwards during the day to show that they were complying with minimum service agreements.

Workers went on strike in opposition to the austerity measures and anti-labour reforms implemented by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) government of President José Zapatero.

The strike was called by the Communist Party-aligned Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO) and the PSOE-dominated Unión General del Trabajo (UGT) trade union federations. It is the second major protest this year that the unions have been obliged to call. But it only went ahead after the reforms had become law, refuting claims by union leaders that they could be watered down by Congress.

The government had plenty of time to prepare for the strike. A special committee, chaired by Zapatero's under-secretary, Juan José Puerta, was set up to prepare strike-breaking measures and organise police

deployment. During yesterday's strike many workers were injured, scores arrested and thousands identified for future prosecution. One of the most serious incidents took place at the aerospace company EADS-CASA in Getafe, where nine pickets were injured.

The general strike took effect shortly after midnight, when pickets descended on food wholesale markets forcing their closure in the capital, Madrid, the country's second largest city, Barcelona; and other major cities, including Seville and Valencia.

Night shift workers at the major car plants then came out on strike. Production at GM, Ford, Citroen, Peugeot, Nissan, Seat, Volkswagen, Mercedes and Iveco ground to a halt. Workers at the National Mint, the Asturias dairies, the Castellón refinery, and the largest oil producer, Repsol, walked out. In Andalucía, fisherman stopped work. The ports of Valencia and Alicante were paralysed. Major companies in Catalonia, including Alstom, Ercros, Pirelli, Delphi, Sony and Yamaha, came to a standstill.

In Galicia, the major banks BBVA, Banco Santander, Banco Pastor and Caixanova were closed, and the main industrial areas were virtually empty. In the Basque country, where the nationalist Basque Nationalist Party has been the prop that has enabled the PSOE to push through the austerity measures in Congress, the strike appears to have had less impact.

Spain's daily newspapers were not printed and kiosks soon closed. Regional TV station Telemadrid stopped broadcasting, as did Canal Sur, TV3 and other channels.

Eighty percent of Spain's high-speed trains were cancelled, all mid-distance trains failed to run, and only a quarter of commuter trains were running. Although the unions ensured that Madrid Metro, which had been the scene of a total walkout by workers earlier in the

year over pay cuts, operated a reduced service, regional train and bus services were at a standstill.

Only about 20 percent of inter-European flights and 40 percent of other international flights operated, again only because of minimum service agreements between unions and the government. Budget airline Ryanair, which claimed it would continue to operate, was forced to cancel the vast majority of its flights to Spain and all its internal ones. The national carrier Iberia claimed it operated the 35 percent of its flights agreed with the unions.

Universities and state schools seem to have backed the strike overwhelmingly. Garbage collecting came to a halt in all major cities. Many shops, bars and cafes closed. In Barcelona, the taxi drivers' union said that 90 percent of its members had stopped work.

During the day, CC.OO general secretary Ignacio Fernandez Toxo declared, "The strike has been an unquestionable success", which he claimed would force the government to back down. He meekly called on the government to revise the 2011 budget that goes to Congress today, in order to "correct the pernicious effects the labour reform is having on the labour market".

UGT organization secretary José Javier Cubillo also pleaded with the government to do the "sensible and reasonable thing" and "rectify immediately" its policies. Once again he allowed the government some breathing space by saying that he recognised that previous governments facing similar circumstances were never able to change course "the day after".

Coordinator of the Communist Party-led United Left (IU), Cayo Lara, declared the general strike had been a "complete success" and "exceeded the most optimistic expectations". But he then called on Zapatero and the PSOE to "open their eyes...change economic policy" and talk to the unions. The government "has enough support on the left in parliament to rectify all its mistakes", he added, warning, "If it does not change its policy, the Spanish people will change Zapatero".

Zapatero repeated his usual statement that he "respects" the unions and expects to start negotiations with them and business leaders as planned again today. He insisted, however, that he will not change his labour reforms and austerity measures—a message reiterated by his treasury minister, Elena Salgado, throughout the day.

Minister of Work Celestino Corbacho also praised the unions saying they had shown "great responsibility" in the strike and had ensured that minimal services had been delivered in 98.4 percent of cases.

The PSOE knows that their political allies in the unions called yesterday's general strike as a necessary display of opposition, before taking part in further talks with the employers and the government aimed at pushing through austerity measures. The working class must not be fooled by such a charade. A rebellion must be launched against the official trade union apparatus as part of building a new party that advances a revolutionary, socialist programme.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact